

SOCIAL SERVICES COMMITTEE
of the
SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

Minutes

A regular meeting of the Social Services Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York on March 12, 2002.

Members Present:

Legislator Paul Tonna - Chairman
Legislator Vivian Fisher - Vice-Chair
Legislator Brian Foley
Legislator William Lindsay
Legislator Lynne Nowick

Also In Attendance:

Paul Sabatino II - Counsel to the Legislature
Dan Hickey - Commissioner of Social Services
Sylvia Diaz - Department of Social Services
Ellen Martin - Aide to Legislator Tonna
Bill Jones - Deputy Commissioner of Social Services
Kim Brandeau - Budget Review Office
Israel Rivera - Aide to Legislator Fisher
Bill Faulk - County Executive's Office
All other interested parties

Minutes Taken By:

Donna Barrett - Court Stenographer

(*THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:45 A.M.*)

CHAIRMAN TONNA:

Okay. All rise for the Pledge of Allegiance led by Commissioner Dan Hickey.

SALUTATION

CHAIRMAN TONNA:

Let's -- what I'd like to do is first go to the agenda and then ask questions, okay? I mean, there might be some questions that I think some Legislators have with regard to the Commissioner or, you know, these people. All right.

1232. Accepting and appropriating 100% Federal Funding for the provision of non-residential Domestic Violence Services in the Department of Social Services and authorizing the County Executive and the Commissioner of Social Services to execute contracts. COUNTY EXEC)

CHAIRMAN TONNA:

I'll a motion, seconded by Legislator Fisher. All in favor? Opposed?

LEG. FISHER:

Can we put this on the consent calender? It's a 100% federal funding.

CHAIRMAN TONNA:

Yeah, I don't have a problem with that. All in favor? Opposed?

Great. APPROVED (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)

1233. Accepting and appropriating 100% Federal Funds and a Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program and authorizing the Commissioner of Social Services and the County Executive to execute a contract with the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County. (COUNTY EXEC)

CHAIRMAN TONNA:

Second one is 1233. I'll make a motion to approve, seconded by Legislator Fisher.

LEG. FISHER:

I would like to make a motion to place it -- except there's a problem on my copy of the agenda, and I wanted to check with yours, because I have 1233 and the title is -- oh, the food stamp. Okay. On my copy it's about Saint Charles Hospital, that was a mistake. So it's the food stamp. I'd like to make a motion to place that on the consent calender.

CHAIRMAN TONNA:

Seconded by myself. All in favor? Opposed? Great.

APPROVED (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)

1234. Accepting and appropriating 100\$ Federal Funds to expand the Hospital Outreach Program at St. Charles Hospital and Rehabilitation Center, creating a position, and authorizing the County Executive and the Commissioner of Social Services to execute a contract. (COUNTY EXEC)

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CHAIRMAN TONNA:

And then finally 1234.

LEG. FISHER:

Same motion.

CHAIRMAN TONNA:

Same motion. I'll make the motion, seconded by Legislator Fisher.

All in favor? Opposed? APPROVED (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)

And Legislator Fisher is making a motion to place it on the consent calender, seconded by myself. All in favor? Opposed? Approved.

CHAIRMAN TONNA:

Okay. I know that there are a number of questions, Dan, that this committee has, I think, about different things. All right. Get a sheriff please to go in and pistol whip Dave Bishop. Anyway, while we're doing -- pistol whipping Legislator Bishop, Dan, if you can come up, I think there are some questions. I'm going to turn it over to Legislator Fisher, vice-Chair of the committee. I think Legislator Foley has some questions. I'm going to recognize Legislator Foley.

LEG. FOLEY:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Commissioner, as you know my office on a

weekly basis has a number of Social Services cases that my staff handles, and we had a very unfortunate situation last week that needs to be addressed in committee, because to my way of thinking, there is a structural issue -- structural problem that needs to be looked at, and this is in the emergency housing area.

Last week my staff got a call a person who was looking for housing. And she and her two children; a 6 year old and a 13 year old, and the mother had told my staff that in order to get placed in emergency shelter the children, instead of being in school had to accompany the mother to the Social Services Center. And this happened on several days last week, not just one day, but several days that the children had to be taken out of school or didn't go to school because the mother was told by -- by the center that the children had to be with her as opposed to going to school while the mother is looking for emergency housing. So the first question is, you know, is that something that is Department policy? This is something that she clearly understood, she did not -- she did not misunderstand what the requirements were placed on her by the center because this happened on several different days. So that's number one.

I'll go through the list, and you can then follow up. Secondly, and again this happened to this client, and we've been told it's happened to others. Each morning clients that are picked up from emergency shelter and brought to DSS, wait most of the day to see someone. This happened last week. There are cases where the client has waited from 8:30 in the morning until three in the afternoon to see someone, been there the whole day, is then told there are in the wrong center and can't be helped. Then they have to be taxied to -- to the correct DSS Center. Finally, DSS Center's constantly change -- constantly changing for emergency shelter clients because center's based on where

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the client's last address is.

So the point there is the fact that which had a case here where the person was at one shelter -- at one DSS Center for most the day, because that's where they were told initially to go to, and then about three, 3:30 in the afternoon when they went up to the window finally, they say, well, no, your paper work is somewhere else, you're -- you're going to have to go the other shelter to -- rather to the other center as opposed to having their paper work sent to -- sent to where they were waiting all day. Now we were told you know, this is not just one extraordinary case, that this has happened on other occasions. So I wanted to bring this to your attention, I wanted to do it on the record, because as I said, it's not the only time this has happened. It's happened before from what we're told. And what I'd like to see happen, whether you can answer today or certainly by the next committee meeting, is a how we can make some -- what I would think -- some very simple adjustments. Instead of having a person wait there all day, if they're there at the very beginning, to make sure that if they're there for emergency housing, that right off the bat they're told whether or not they're at the correct center. And they're basing -- they're going to that center because that's where they were told the day before to go to that center, and it ended up they had to go from Coram to Smithtown, and they had to go out to Hampton Bays and back again. So this is something that's -- hopefully it's not endemic to the system, but it's happened on a number of

occasions.

MS. DIAZ:
Brian.

LEG. FOLEY:
Just for the record, can you just --

MS. DIAZ:
Sylvia Diaz, Chief Deputy Commissioner. Was this family taxied from one of our shelters to the wrong center, is that what you're stating?

LEG. FOLEY:
Correct. Correct. Correct.

MS. DIAZ:
Okay. Okay. That's problematic.

LEG. FOLEY:
And what we have, all the particulars of the case, you know, we have back at the office.

MS. DIAZ:
Great.

LEG. FOLEY:
And the client who -- rather the caseworker who my staff was working with has all the information, but all I'm saying to you is it's not a stand-alone case. This has happened on at least several other occasions from what we've been told.

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MS. DIAZ:
Now, in your first -- in the first case that you reference --

LEG. FOLEY:
About the two children having to go to the center as opposed to going to school because that's what the mother was told that's what -- the whole family had to be together at the center. That's what she was told.

MS. DIAZ:
I'm actually -- this woman presented at the -- at the center as homeless, is that what your information was?

LEG. FOLEY:
She was looking for emergency housing.

MS. DIAZ:
Okay. Normally when people present at the -- at the center, they are met by a housing worker, and actually, Paul, do you want to talk about the process is for --

LEG. FOLEY:
I think the best process here is let's lay out what at least the experience was in my office, look into it, and then at the next meeting, which is only a few weeks away, you can give us a response to it, okay?

MS. DIAZ:
Very good.

LEG. FOLEY:
Thank you, Madam Chair.

LEG. FISHER:
Thank you, Legislator Foley. I have a question for -- actually a situation which occurred to my aide, Israel Rivera, and I'm going to ask him to come forward and describe what happened, because I've become concerned about disrespect for clients, perhaps being endemic. I'm hoping that it's not a very wide spread problem throughout DSS. But Israel, can you just go and sit at the table with the Commissioners.

MR. RIVERA:
Sure.

LEG. FOLEY:
Madam Chair, while he's going to the front, if I can just add one other point. The shelter in question was the Hampton Bays Motel at 29 Gardeners Lane in Hampton Bays. And the person who called our office said they were sent all way there out from Smithtown. When they got there, the place was full of cockroaches, ants and fleas, and she refused to have her children and herself stay there. And this on of our -- this is on our list of emergency houses -- emergency housing rather. So I would ask that, you know, that an immediate inspection be made of those particular premises because this is -- as I said, the person was desperate for housing. But she saw what awful conditions

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this particular motel was, she believed it was not even habitable for -- for her family even under an emergency basis. So I don't know the last time there was a surprise inspection of that particular motel, but it would be worth while to take a look at.

LEG. FISHER:
Didn't we have legislation last year regarding setting of standards of emergency -- yes? Okay. Then I suppose it would be just a question of not having been inspected recently enough, is that -- I suppose because there are so many shelters, it's difficult to get?

MS. DIAZ:
We have -- we have inspectors who go out on a fairly regular basis. We -- this is the first I hear of this kind of infestation, so we will send someone out to take a look at it.

LEG. FOLEY:
Thank you.

MR. HICKEY:
And I think everybody who has worked with my office, you know we have a response unit. If you call in, we do give you detailed reports as to what our findings are. I think our correspondence has been fairly -- fairly quick, but we would like to get out in the field.

LEG. FISHER:
My question was answered very quickly. Israel, can you just speak into the mike and just explain what had happened. I think it would be

easier for Israel to do it then from my -- then for me to try to do it second hand.

MR. RIVERA:

I've been working with this one constituent, Tina Monteforte. She is applying for Medicaid, she's a senior citizen. And the week, I guess, well, the Legislator was on vacation, and our office was kind of in a disrepair, so we were --

LEG. FISHER:

Under construction.

MR. RIVERA:

Dressed a little casually as we tried to work under construction. So we were dressed a little casually as we were doing our work for the week. And I couldn't -- the constituent couldn't go herself to pick up Medicaid applications and all the material she needed to apply for Medicaid. So I, myself, did it for her. And that Monday I went a little late so I had to come back the next morning on Tuesday and --

LEG. FISHER:

A little late. Israel, what time did you go there?

MR. RIVERA:

I went there at 4:10, but four o'clock they close the center on Motor Parkway. So I went the next morning around 8:30, and I went to the window, and I said my name is Israel Rivera, and I'm a Legislative Aide to Vivian Fisher, and I'm here to -- I would like to pick up some

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Medicaid application materials to take back to the office. And so she kind of looked at me a little inquisitively, and she says, well, you really don't have to lie, where are you coming from. And I'm like, what are you talking about, and she says, well, you don't have to tell me that, you know, you work for a Legislator in order to get services here. I told her I'm here to get service, I'm here to represent a constituent and get some materials for a constituent. I showed her my county ID and I showed her my license. And at that point, she had nothing to do but just to give me the materials. I has asked if a supervisor was available, and she said no. She didn't want to give me her name. I remember the face, but I was just like, okay. And she gave me -- I got a hold of the materials and then I left the office. But I'm -- I really don't want to -- I'm concerned about my constituent, but I'm even more concerned about how me as a Legislative Aide is treated as opposed to how some of these clients are treated. And I came back and told Vivian what had happen to me. And we're, you know, I'm still working with this constituent, and that's where we're at.

LEG. FISHER:

The sense was, Israel, that you felt she was dismissing you.

MR. RIVERA:

I felt --

LEG. FISHER:

Before you said anything she was saying, well, there's no need to lie. It was as if -- because of the way you looked.

MR. RIVERA:

Yeah, I mean, I had jeans, a sweater, a puffy Gap goose-down jacket. Will that stereo-type me? I'm not sure. But, you know, I just didn't find it to be very fair.

COMMISSIONER HICKEY:

I just really want to know for my own edification, was she rude? I mean, there may be a misunderstanding as to the question that was asked or what she meant. I think she meant we service everybody equally. But was she rude to you or did she not give you what you needed?

MR. RIVERA:

Well, yeah, I thought that she was rude, she completely dismissed as if she didn't want to hear what I had to say. You know, I didn't even really get a chance to explain as much as I had wanted to in order to get what I had needed. It wasn't like I was just trying to, you know, pull strings, or, you know, tell her, I'm a Legislative Aide, you have to, you know, serve me in a specific way. But I was just letting her know that I was just there to pick up some materials and then just, you know, leave to help a constituent. I mean, I stood there for maybe 15, 20 minutes before I even got some attention. So.

COMMISSIONER HICKEY:

Let me know what date you were there. And it was at the Medicaid window, I believe; is that correct?

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MR. RIVERA:

Yes. It's the one on the far right, and I was there the morning of the 26th at eight -- around 8:30.

COMMISSIONER HICKEY:

Did the Supervisor come speak to you?

MR. RIVERA:

No.

LEG. FISHER:

So I just wanted to let you know that it had occurred. Actually, Israel didn't even tell me as soon as I got back from vacation. It just came up in conversation. I said, well, you know, we have a meeting next week, we'll bring it to the attention of the Commissioner because he did feel that he was treated rudely and dismissed. She was very dismissive. So I thought certainly someone who is going in there who has a job, who's working officially and is very secure with who he is was upset, I wouldn't want to imagine how somebody feels who really needs the work -- the help.

MR. HICKEY:

You are absolutely right. Thank you

LEG. FISHER:

So this is why I wanted to let you know that it had occurred.

MS. DIAZ:

Just so that you know, we welcome your comments on these matters. We have been working hard with staff to create a more positive work environment, we feel that that's part of this. We've been working on

really making us sort of a kindler, gentler kind of department in terms of how we greet the public. And I was happy actually to have -- I go to school at night, and one of my classmates actually said to me that she had seen a difference in the last few months in how our workers had be treating some of the people who do present. So there are goods sides as well as bad sides. Unfortunately, we don't too many of those good stories. And so I would like to certainly put that on the record.

MR. RIVERA:

I agree. I have been working with two different social workers this week on two different constituents, and they have been absolutely fabulous. I just found that one particular incident where, I think, I was just, you know, prejudged and, you know, discriminated against because obviously, I'm Latino, and I'm dressed casually. So maybe I'm just there, you know, on a different thing, but.

MS. DIAZ:

Just so that you know, they also know that one of their bosses is a Latina.

LEG. FISHER:

Thank you. Paul had left a series of questions here. I'll have to be very honest, I don't really know what they're about. May I read you the question and perhaps you can clarify it? Okay. Well, the first

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one is clear. Okay. The tutoring program at respite centers has been instituted. How is it the program being received, and how many children are being serviced? That's straight forward.

MS. DIAZ:

Actually, it has been effective basically when we have our children who are in transition who haven't been placed in a permanent -- I can't really use the word permanent, but more consistent housing, we have been able to provide some of the children on-site tutoring services. They've been going very well, and although we would rather have the kids attending their home district classes full time, until we get them to that point though, we can't -- we've been able to provide this so that they're not just sort of sitting around waiting all day. Very much though, it's an opportunity for little stimulation, and it varies from day to day, the number of participants based on our numbers of people who remain in respite. It's not a large number, maybe 4 to 6 children on a daily basis. And I can give you more specific numbers if you wanted.

LEG. FISHER:

Well, you know, you can pass that on to Paul.

MS. DIAZ:

Actually, Paul's office gets a daily count of the number of children and their ages in respite, so he would know actually on a daily basis.

LEG. FISHER:

He may want it on the record here. Maybe that's why he left the question.

LEG. FISHER:

The second question. I'll just read it as it appears, "five year time

limit on" -- oh, no. The second question is something that I've been looking at also. How is the Welfare to Work Program panning out? How are -- what's the impact on the County, and what steps have been instituted to address the people losing public assistance? Will there be a budgetary impact on us, on the County?

COMMISSIONER HICKEY:

There is a budgetary impact. It was in last year's budget. I think it's in the neighborhood of about \$2 million. There basically is no impact on the client, it's just a methodology in how they get their -- their money has changed. They do not get the cash assistance that they formally received. They become part of the safety net. Once the five years is up, because New York State Constitution requires us to continue to care for them. But we will pay vendors like landlords and stuff directly, and the amount of cash they receive has been diminished.

LEG. FISHER:

Okay. And now I'll wait until he returns because there are a series of questions about the Institutional Care Strike Force. Would you like to speak about that? Or had you -- did you know he was going to address this issue?

COMMISSIONER HICKEY:

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No. No, I was not aware of what we were going to address.

LEG. FISHER:

All right. So, yes, I think we'll cover it when he's here rather than my trying to field all those questions. Are there any other questions from anybody else on the committee? Okay. If there are no further --

COMMISSIONER HICKEY:

I'd like to say, you know, back in January, we had a program orientation, your aide was there, Lynne was there, I think Bill was making arrangements to come over and get an orientation with the department. Any time that you feel you need additional information or you'd like to see something or your aides, you know, need to be introduced to people that can help them out, we are available to do that at your convenience.

LEG. FISHER:

It was very helpful, I met with Sylvia very recently, we had lunch together. And it's good sometimes to just sit down one to one and talk about issues that -- actually, not even issues, but just ideas and what is going on at DSS. It's good to have that, and I thank you, Sylvia, for that.

LEG. NOWICK:

I just wanted to say that I did go for breakfast at the Commissioner's Office and Sylvia, of course, was there. It was very informative. I have learned so much, and I had no idea how much you do. I had no idea. And you have a great staff there, and, of course, I always think Sylvia's part of your great staff, and thank you for that. Bagels were good too.

COMMISSIONER HICKEY:

I think Sylvia's great too. I want to put that on the record.

LEG. NOWICK:
As I do.

LEG. FISHER:
Okay. Well, if we have no further praises or comments, I call the meeting adjourned. Any second on that please. Bill. Legislator Lindsay seconds that, and we are adjourned.

(*THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED AT 12:10P.M.*)

{ } DENOTES BEING SPELLED PHONETICALLY